

It All Began With Pong

By JAMES GESCHKE

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Not so long ago (circa 1971) in a land not so far away (Palo Alto), Stanford University student Nolan Bushnell was playing around with electronic circuitry and came up with an idea.

He conferred with his roommate Bob Rosenthal and the two agreed Bushnell's brainstorm just might result in that "better mousetrap." They could become famous.

The idea was simple. Using circuitry that incorporates microprocessors — those mite-sized circuit boards seen on IBM television commercials — Bushnell developed an electronic tennis game that could be played by two people on a TV-like screen. It was to be a barroom game — sort of a sophisticated twist to billiards.

Such was the auspicious birth of Pong, the prototype electronic game and forerunner to the coin-operated video-game explosion. Pong was a big success, and both men became millionaires. Bushnell eventually went on to start Atari, the leading name in home-video games.

The electronic space wars had begun.

Now, one decade and billions of quarters later, Mark Madura recalls that story, and laughs. Madura is chairman of the board of Brick Road Inc., one of the largest arcade operators in San Diego. Brick Road owns the Yellow Brick Road Arcade at University Towne Centre and the Quarter Snatcher in Mission Beach.

For Madura, that road isn't just yellow. It is solid gold.

"You know, sometimes I have this dream at night that there is a Fairy Godmother out there dropping quarters into these machines," Madura said. "Things are going so well I can't help thinking something's wrong."

Things definitely are going well in the video-game industry.

"Arcades and manufacturers everywhere are doing banner business as Americans blast away at the never-ending attacks of electronic alien invaders. Time Magazine recently reported the coin-operated game industry grossed \$5 billion in the United States last year."

That's 20 billion quarters — roughly twice the amount the U.S. government spends on the space shuttle. The estimates are even higher for 1982.

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The average coin-operated game costs between \$2,500 and \$3,000. Operators say in a busy arcade with a good location, one game can take in up to \$300 a week. Thus, a popular game such as Pac Man can pay for itself in two months.

The profits, like the game points, are mounting. And not all of it is misdirected lunch money.

"We get everybody from little 3-year-old girls to businessmen to senior citizens," said one arcade operator in the beach area. "We have a lot of regulars, mostly people between their teens and 20s — but some are also businessmen, women, everybody."

Could a night at the arcade someday be a family outing?

"It already is," he said.

Countywide, dozens of game rooms have surfaced. Recently, in Mission Bay, one owner opened an arcade in such great haste that he has yet to name the place. Many offer door prizes, and most have at least snack-bar service. One arcade, Pacific Games in Pacific Beach, offers free popcorn.

Mostly they are a fantasyland filled with row upon row of colorful, noisy screens, most of them housed in booth-like encasings. Chairs are available, but are usually occupied only by the more serious, skillful players.

Pinball machines sit unused. Though they have been converted to micro-electronics, they are relics now in a sophisticated age. Pinball is passe. Modern game-players would rather fight than tilt.

→ Astro Blaster (Sega), Asteroids (Atari), Phoenix (Century), Defender (Williams) and Frogger (Gremlin) are all hot, but the hottest in San Diego arcades is still Pac Man, Bally-Midway's famous dot-gobbling gold mine.

To score points in Pac Man, a player must work his disc through a maze, eating dots while avoiding increasing numbers of game-ending monsters. Pac Man has attracted legions of dedicated players, and has been the top attraction for 18 months.

Like Space Invaders, its kingpin predecessor, Pac Man will eventually be cast aside at the advent of newer, more sophisticated games.

"Kids in the Midwest who play Pac Man play the game in its first phase, which is trying to avoid the monsters chasing them," Madura said. "Here in Southern California, kids have passed that first stage. They don't even look at the monsters because they've established a pattern which allows them to work their way through the maze and score a maximum number of points."

"There's a definite regional aspect to this. In the Midwest, in Oklahoma and Kansas, the simple gun games do better than the others. In Southern California, the kids seem more sophisticated. They go for the more challenging, space-type games — the Tempests, the Defenders."

Thousands have caught the bug. Many people spend their lunch breaks and after-school hours in the raucous madness of San Diego's game rooms.

Some prefer to keep their addictions hidden.

One well-dressed businessman in his 40s was recently seen in a downtown arcade around noon, furiously maneuvering his ship through enemy attacks in Defender. He declined to give his name.

"I sometimes feel like a kid again. I just don't want my wife and the guys I work with to know I'm down here spending a couple of bucks a day playing kid games," he said. "I guess you could say I'm staying in the closet."

Others are not so clandestine.

Dave Gillis and Bob Cordivola and Bob Allison are all in their 20s and all work in computer electronics, though

not in the game industry. Each openly admits to being hopelessly addicted to the games.

The games seem to have surpassed the fad stage. Home-game sales are growing, expanding mass interest. Many in the industry believe the games have carved a permanent place in today's video-oriented culture, and have evolved into a new participatory sport.

"Most entertainment activities are spectator-oriented," said Bob Rosenbaum of Gremlin Industries, a San Diego-based game manufacturer. Gremlin produces Frogger, one of the more popular arcade games.

"Going to sporting events, to the movies, to a play — they're all passive, non-participation forms of entertainment," he said. "People like the games. They like the competition, the one-on-one confrontations."

Pat Hall, a consultant for Leisure Time Electronics, an Indianapolis-based game manufacturer, is even more direct. "The two fastest-growing industries in the United States are first, electronics, and second, entertainment," Hall said. "We're combining the two and creating a new sport."

"We must change constantly — something new, unique all the time. We try to introduce new board games every 90 days."

"But you know," he said, "I think the key aspect to this business is cheap entertainment."

Indeed, even with the trend toward sophistication, the price of playing has remained virtually untouched by inflation.

In 1972, it cost a quarter to play a simple game of electronic tennis. Today, for about four minutes you can fantasize about saving all of mankind in a game of Space Invaders — and the price is still only two bits.

Geschke is a staff member of the San Diego Union.